Near Left: Nick Tanape of Nanwalek has many roles in his community — master qayaq builder, cultural messenger, hunter, fisherman, and father to name a few. He is an invaluable role model for the Suqpiat people.

Photograph courtesy of Ronald T. Stanek

Far Left: The village of Nanwalek in 1898

Albatross Collection, National Archives

Suqpiat of the Lower Kenai Peninsula Coast

by Ronald T. Stanek

Nanwalek and Port Graham are two small mostly Alaska Native communities of 165 people and 255 people respectively, located at the southwestern tip of the Kenai Peninsula at the mouth of the Cook Inlet. In 1995, the National Park Service contracted with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Subsistence to provide an ethnographic overview and assessment for Port Graham and Nanwalek *(Stanek 1998)*. The focus of this project was the Native cultural history of the outer Kenai Peninsula. Current residents of these two communities have ancestors who lived in former communities along the outer Kenai Peninsula coast, and they continue using the bordering waters and lands in Kenai Fjords National Park. The ethnographic overview and a subsequent Minerals Management Service contract report *(Stanek 2000)* provide first-hand accounts of people who lived along the outer Kenai Peninsula coast in the late 1800s and early 1900s and give detailed descriptions of traditional and contemporary life.

Research Methods

The primary objective of the project was to record the knowledge of many living residents who had ancestral ties to areas in the park. Information on the ancestral background of Nanwalek and Port Graham residents was best gained by asking people about their family histories. This was done through oral interviews and recordings. Oral histories of deceased individuals were also a source of information, through audiotapes that were available from family members and archives. Although some published documents provided descriptions of community histories, very few gave detailed backgrounds of individual families.

Other sources of information included written accounts and journals of early explorers and workers in Russian and American trade companies, and early Russian Orthodox Church records. Archives and libraries contained historical documents and photographs related to the area. Scientific reports and government documents provided valuable statistical information for the study.

Unegkurmiut of the Kenai Peninsula Coast

Sufficient differences occurred between languages of the Alutiiq living on Kodiak Island and the Alaska Peninsula (Koniag Alutiiq) and the Alutiiq of the Kenai Peninsula and Prince William Sound (Chugach Alutiiq) for linguists to identify two distinct dialects. Ethnographers in the 1930s documented at least eight social groupings of Chugach Alutiiq Natives that occupied Prince William Sound at the time of contact with Russian traders. A ninth group, known as the Unegkurmiut, lived along the outer coast of the lower Kenai Peninsula *(Figure 1)*.

Orthographic variations occurred between the Alutiiq of Nanwalek and Port Graham and other Chugach Alutiiq in Prince William Sound communities. Although Sugcestun speakers from the latter two areas understand each other, there are recognizable differences in many words. Exactly how this variation resulted is not clear; however, tracing the ancestry of families in Nanwalek and Port Graham has provided some understanding.

The first European contact with the Unegkurmiut occurred sometime in the late 1780s by Russian fur traders. The accounts of Captain James Cook's travel to the area in 1786 include reference to lower Cook Inlet Natives, as do the journals of Captains Billings and Saryschev in 1790 during their expedition to the northwest coast. The naturalist, Carl Merck, described the Native inhabitants encountered as he sailed into lower Cook Inlet. Later in 1794, Captain George Vancouver's expedition sailed just outside Port Dick and also described Natives they encountered.

Describing past Unegkurmiut life is a work in progress pursued by anthropologists, archeologists, and Native descendants. Information from archeological studies along the outer coast coupled with traditional knowledge and cultural practices found in Nanwalek and Port Graham today, provide a basis for describing much of Unegkurmiut way of life in the contact and proto-contact period.

Nanwalek elders born in the early 1900s used many of the same technologies

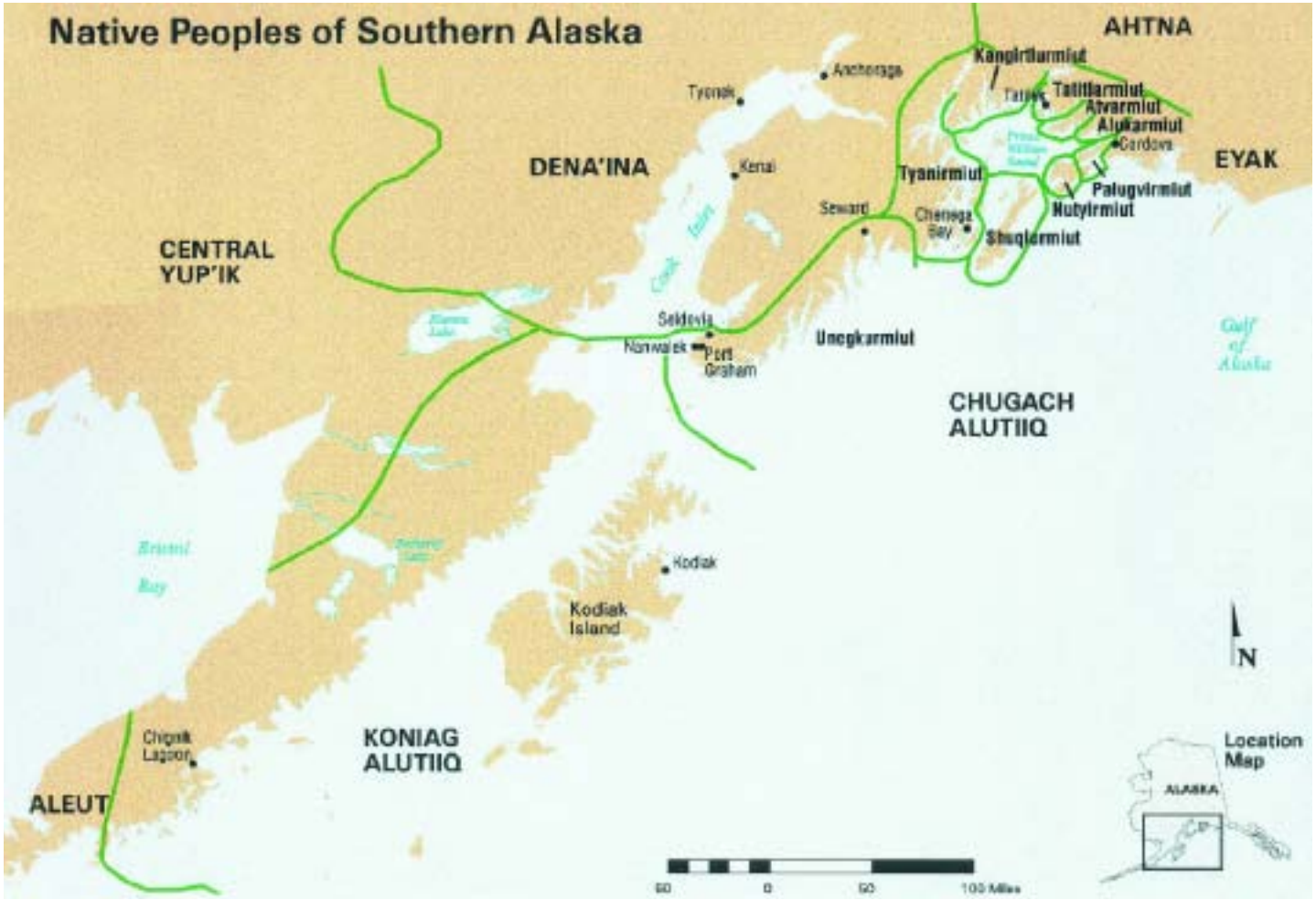


Figure 1. Map showing the locations of the Chugach Alutiiq and the Koniag Alutiiq in southcentral Alaska.

of their parents and grandparents. Spears, traps, weirs *(Figure 2)*, hooks, watercraft, and techniques of resource harvest and preservation of earlier times were described and recorded. Some elders continued use of traditional spears, hooks, and weirs into the 1950s, at which time laws prohibited their usage. Western technologies for fishing were introduced and made the legal means of harvest. But one Nanwalek elder continued to use a certain type of spear *(Figure 3)* for catching salmon and preferred that method to the rod and reel or hook and line in the 1940s and 1950s. Preservation of foods through drying, smoking, fermentation, and storage in bladders of seal oil are well known in village life today.

In the 1830s, a trading post and Russian Orthodox chapel were established at Yalik village. Church records provided lists of people who were christened and other activities of the clergy. In 1880, Yalik village had a population of 32 people. Owing to the devout following of the Native people in the Russian Orthodox Church, and the difficulty of servicing such a distant and inaccessible locale by clergy headquartered in Kenai, Yalik residents were requested to move to Alexandrovsk (later named English Bay and then Nanwalek).

Although many people moved to Nanwalek, other locations along the southern tip of the peninsula also became their new homes. A number of current residents were born at Windy Bay, Port Chatham, and Koyuktolik Bay. Slowly the populations in all of the lower peninsula diminished, and by the 1950s, the last community to be abandoned was Port Chatham. Everyone moved to either Nanwalek or Port Graham.

This study found that 19 locations *(Table 1)* between Resurrection Bay and Port Graham Bay, are named with Sugcestun placenames and/or contain notable archeological evidence of pre-contact and early historic occupation. Two primary settlement locations, Aialik and Yaliq Bays, were occupied by Nanwalek and Port Graham residents who were alive in the 1970s and 1980s. First-hand accounts were recorded in oral histories, and were passed on in oral traditions and later recorded by grandchildren. These testimonials indicate that nearly every bay, island, and beach had habitations such as barabaras, semi-subterranean houses, and were used for some aspect of survival. The shorelines of Nuka Passage and Nuka Bay also had temporary campsites occupied by Nanwalek residents, and in the 1930s, Euro-American settlers living on Nuka Island found Native masks stored in nearby caves. Coincidentally, a description of a masking ceremony was provided in an oral history of a Nanwalek resident when he was a small boy accompanying his father during a winter trapping trip to Nuka Bay in the very early 1900s.

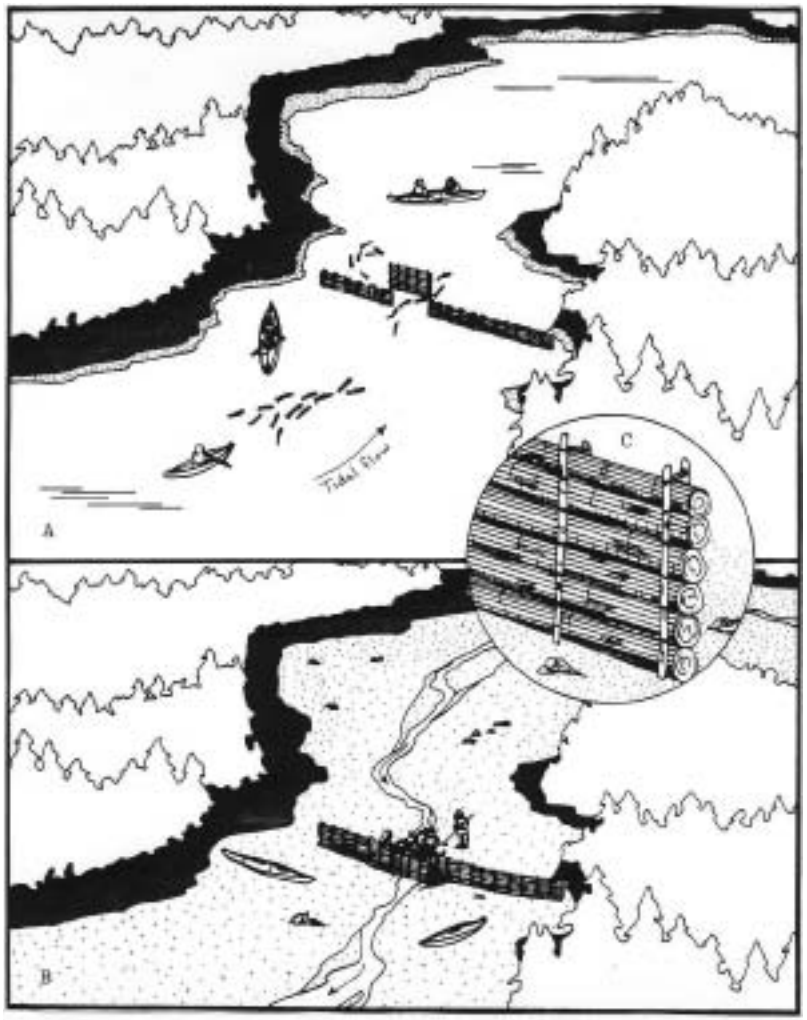
Study results showed that most Nanwalek and Port Graham residents traced their ancestry to the Alutiiq or Suqpiat who lived in a number of the aforementioned settlements and camps along the outer coast. Contact with Russian fur traders and Aleut hunters who accompanied them in the late 1700s and Euro-American and Asian immigrants in the 1800s, resulted in intermarriages and families of mixed ancestries. Family surnames were indicative of many different family ancestries, and those in the two communities included a high incidence of Russian origin. Some names were traced to Prince William Sound communities, while others were from Kodiak, the Chigniks, Kenai, and Seldovia. Interestingly, some surnames that appeared in church records were no longer present. A few names were of recently immigrated people who married into the community.

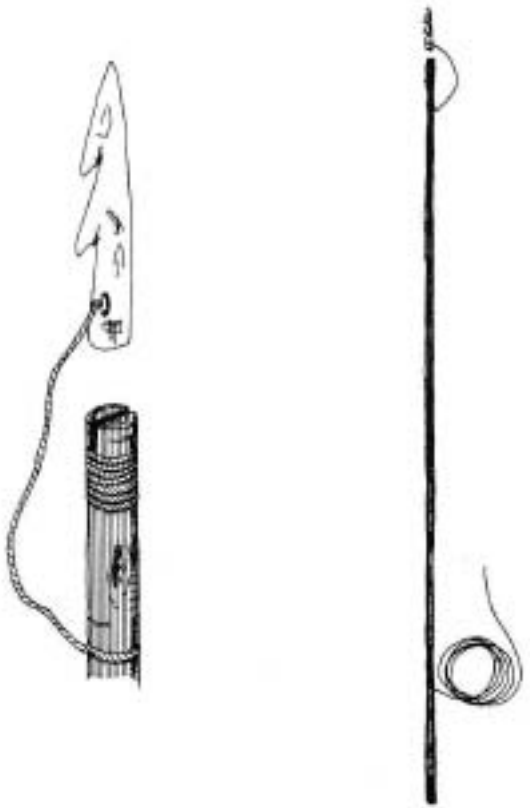
Throughout the 1800s, diseases such as influenza virus, and measles took a devastating toll on the Native populace throughout Alaska. The fur trade drastically altered traditional Native life by focusing the Native economies around cash and their populations around trade centers. Fur value drastically declined in the late 1880s, while the pursuit of gold brought many Euro-American immigrants, and the commercial fishing industry took hold at the turn of the century. Prince William Sound Suqpiat were affected by the decline in fur values as the Nuchek trading post closed, and by increased competition for subsistence resources and conflict among regional groups. Many families left the sound and moved to the outer Kenai Peninsula. There, they integrated with the Unegkurmiut and eventually moved on to Nanwalek and Port Graham.

Contemporary Life in Port Graham and Nanwalek

Suqpiaq is still the predominant cultural background ascribed by Nanwalek and Port Graham residents; however, some refer to themselves as Aleut. Several languages may be spoken in contemporary households. English is the primary language taught in schools, while Sugcestun is spoken in many homes and taught in school classes and an immersion program in Nanwalek. Russian is also understood by many elder residents and is often heard in Russian Orthodox Church ceremonies, and many Russian words are embedded in the Sugcestun lexicon.

Today, an outsider visiting these villages might not expect residents had ties to Prince William Sound, the outer Kenai Peninsula, and Russia that go back for hundreds or perhaps a thousand years. But salmon hanging in drying racks or curing in smokehouses is telling as to the origins of these people. Most people would simply tell you that this is the way they have been taught. If you have dinner at someone's home you might be served





Left: Figure 2. A fish weir in the English Bay River, early 1900s. Drawn by Cynthia Pappas as described by the late Joe Tanape.

Right: Figure 3. Diagram of a fish spear used by one resident at least until the 1940s and 1950s. Drawn by Cynthia Pappas as described by the late Sergius Moonin.

Settlement/Community	Pre-1880	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1929	1939	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
Kangiak (Day Harbor)	*	De Laguna notes there were villages in Day Harbor and a group called the Kanirmiut or "Bay People"											
Qutalleq (Resur. Bay)	*	A village mentioned by one of Birket-Smith's (1953) informants.											
Kani'lik (Two Bays)	*	De Laguna notes this may be Two Arm Bay. Birket-Smith (p.116) indicates Kangilik as near Seward.											
Aialik (Aialik Bay - several sites)	*	Archeological sites (Schaaf 1988); Oral tradition (McMullen 1997) describe occupation. Residents moved to Nanwalek and Koyuktolik Bay in mid 1800s.											
(Two Arm Bay)	*	Archeological site and found in oral history.											
(McArthur Pass)	*	Extensive archeological evidence, Schaaf and Johnson (1990), indicates resident population in last 1,000 years.											
Nuka Bay (Ualeq in De Laguna)	*	A number of village and camp sites on west side of Nuka Is. (Crowell 1993).											
Yaaliq (Yalik Bay)	NDA	32	Billings 1790 expedition met the Yalermiut. Moved to Nanwalek and other Cook Inlet communities in the 1880s.										
Kangiliq (Port Dick)	*	West arm of Port Dick (Leer et al.). Vancouver's expedition encountered a large number of Natives in kayaks. Same name of village near Seward.											
Tagaluq (Rocky Bay)	*	Oral history of Port Graham and Nanwalek residents and Leer et al. 1980.											
Kaniagaluq (Picnic Harbor)	*	Oral history of Port Graham and Nanwalek residents.											
Nunalleq (Windy Bay village)	*	Oral history of Port Graham and Nanwalek residents and Leer et al. 1980.											
Ashivak (Cape Douglas)	NDA	46	85	Aband.	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Tamarwik	*	A small village and travel stop at Anderson Beach on the mainland north of Perl Island. A sockeye stream and good harbor seal area.											
Arrulaa'ik	*	Clam Cove Village located at Port Chatham - inhabited at the time of Vancouver's expedition in 1794.											
To'qakvik (Chrome Village)	*	Based on De Laguna's informants, this was the village at the site of Portlock.											
Portlock (Port Chatham)	---	---	---	Established in 1915		47	NDA	---	---	---	---	---	---
Qugyugtuliq (Dogfish Bay)	*	De Laguna and oral history of Port Graham and Nanwalek residents. Abandoned in the 1930s.											
Nanwalek (English Bay)	20	88	107	NDA	NDA	NDA	107	48	75	78	58	124	158
To'qakvik or Coal Village	100	Established in the 1850s, moved to Nanwalek in the 1860s.					---	---	---	---	---	---	
Paluwik (Port Graham)	*	---	---	---	Established in 1912		NDA	93	92	139	107	161	166
Seldovia (Ostrovski)	NDA	74	99	144	173	258	379	410	460	460	437	473	459

Sources: Rollins 1978; De Laguna 1956; Meganack 1982; Tanape 1983; Birket-Smith 1953; Schaaf 1988; Schaaf and Johnson 1990; Crowell 1993; Leer et al. 1980

* Permanent or seasonal settlements in pre-1880s. Documented by archeological and or oral history information.

NDA Site was occupied but no population estimates available.

Table 1. Settlements and historic population estimates for the lower Cook Inlet and outer Kenai Peninsula coast.

rice, potatoes, salmon, hamburger, seal meat, and vegetable salad. They might say a prayer and face religious icons in one corner of the room. On further inquiry, they tell you their parents are of Aleut and Russian ancestry, and these practices were passed down through generations.

Homes are heated by oil, wood, or electricity. Motorized boats, trucks, and airplanes are common means of transportation. Traditional knowledge and experience provided by elders helps everyone survive in an economy that is dependant on cash, but where cash does not always adequately provide for everyone's needs, and may only average between $6,000 and $8,000 per person annually. Wild food consumption ranks the highest among communities in southcentral Alaska, averaging more than 325 pounds per person per year. Salmon make up half or more of the total annual wild resources harvested, while halibut and other saltwater fish are about one-third the harvest. Shellfish, moose, goat, black bear, and birds make up the remainder.

Combining the traditional knowledge of their ancestors with modern technology and education has afforded Unegkurmiut descendants a unique way of life. Residents still travel the coastline in search of wild resources for food and income. Elders have taught them to respect the land and waters, as well as fellow man. Unfortunately, events of the twentieth century brought dramatic changes to a well-adapted society. Western educators forced children to lose much of their language, which meticulously described and defined how to live in the environment. Oil spills poisoned the foods that fed generations. But by learning new skills and remembering the wisdom of their elders, residents have not only learned to survive, but improved their natural and manmade environments. Today the connection with the outer Kenai Peninsula and Kenai Fjords National Park is still very much intact. Although the area is a national park, Nanwalek and Port Graham Corporation members hold title and retain subsistence rights on select lands in the park. But those are not the most significant ties; clearly the knowledge and stories of ancestors, the names of old villages, bays, and islands are the true threads that tie the two.

Note:

This article on the Suqpiat or Alutiiq cultural ties with Kenai Fjords National Park draws upon information compiled over many years of work with residents of Nanwalek and Port Graham. Several other reports contain more detailed descriptions of historical and contemporary subsistence lifeways in these two communities *(Stanek 1985, 1998, 2000)*, while an in-depth description of the park is contained in Cook and Norris *(1998)*.

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